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# Inside the Philippine Insurgency

**By Steve Lohr**

IT WAS ABOUT 6:30 IN THE MORNING WHEN THE shooting started. On a jungle ridge dotted with coconut palms, more than 50 members of the New People's Army, the Communist rebels in the Philippines, were getting ready for breakfast at a makeshift camp in Sorsogon Province, some 240 miles southeast of Manila (map, page 42). They had finished a half-hour of calisthenics and drills, and the morning meal, wild cabbage stewed in coconut milk, and rice, was cooking. Here and there, the young guerrillas — an army without uniforms, wearing sneakers or barefoot — were attending to chores, cleaning weapons, drying laundry and washing in a nearby stream.

At the sound of gunfire, the piercing, staccato report of automatic rifles, the rebels took up their weapons and supplies, breaking camp hurriedly but without panic. The Government troops, apparently marine and army units, were getting closer. There were several brief exchanges of fire, with the guerrillas firing bursts from their M-16 assault rifles and then pulling back. At one point, the military shot from as close as 150 yards, and bullets creased a tree a few feet away.

Then the rebels, hugging the ground and crouching behind palms, returned the fire in ear-splitting bursts. They fired their M-79 grenade launchers as well. The explosions sent the Government troops scurrying for cover. The guerrillas then broke into two groups and fled into the jungle, with the military in pursuit.

A couple of days before, a New People's Army officer conceded

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that the Philippine armed forces had some well trained and proficient fighters, especially the marines and the army scout rangers. "But in the local areas, they are foreigners compared to us," he said. "So they are deaf and blind."

His claim was put to the test that morning and afternoon, as the detachment of about two dozen rebels played a cat-and-mouse game for the next six hours with the pursuing military. The escape traced a circuitous route over jungle terrain and across rivers and streams. Guerrilla scouts, equipped with hand-held radios, monitored the movements of the Government troops.

Eventually, the rebels found a gap in the military's encircling maneuver and slipped through undetected. When one group of guerrillas came upon the isolated bamboo-and-thatch hut of a local farmer, they found a welcome reception. There was water, handfuls of rice, and shelter for as long as the fleeing rebels wanted it. After the early exchanges, amounting to about 200 rounds, there was no more gunfire. In the N.P.A. unit I accompanied, there were no casualties that day.

THE SHOOTOUT AND CHASE IN SOUTHEASTern Luzon was but one minor skirmish in the escalating warfare between Communist insurgents and the Government of Ferdinand E. Marcos, the enduring strongman of Southeast Asia who has ruled the Philippines for two decades. As recently as two years ago, the New People's Army was generally dismissed by the Philippine Government and foreign analysts alike as nothing more than the latest version of the insurgent groups that, under various banners and ideologies, have come and gone for almost four centuries on this 7,000-island archipelago. But that complacency has been replaced by alarm as the Communist rebellion has grown rapidly in the last couple of years, aided immeasurably by political and economic developments that have amplified the appeal of the radical alternative the guerrillas espouse.

The August 1983 murder of the opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino Jr. at the Manila International Airport, as he returned from three years of self-imposed exile in the United States, seriously undermined the credibility of the Marcos Government and the Philippine military, which has been implicated in the killing. Since then, the economy has plummeted, law and order have deteriorated and military abuses have continued.

Washington, international lenders and the domestic opposition have all pressed Marcos to allow a revival of democratic institutions and to relax his strong hold on the nation's political and economic life. This message was reinforced in late October, when President Reagan sent Senator Paul Laxalt of Nevada to meet with President Marcos in Manila. According to United States officials, Laxalt expressed Reagan's "serious" concern over the situation in the country, and urged Marcos to undertake urgent reforms.

The 68-year-old president, however, still retains most of his powers, including the authority to make laws by personal decree. His political opposition, weakened by internal rivalries, seems powerless to change that. And skepticism is widespread as to whether most opposition politicians genuinely want to change Philippine politics from being an exercise in personal enrichment or, as one businessman puts it, they just want to take "their turn at the trough." Today, it isn't unusual to hear lawyers, doctors and corporate executives admit privately that they are sympathizers of the N.P.A. because they regard it as "the only real alternative."

Violence, often amounting to the simple murder of government officials and other perceived enemies, is a central part of the N.P.A. alternative. Yet the use of such tactics seems to have gained increasing acceptance, even among many affluent Filipinos. "The violence is against my conscience," said a 42-year-old businessman who is a rebel sympathizer. "But in our circumstances, it is a way, a necessary evil, to reach a better end for this country."

During the first half of this year, insurgency-related clashes left an average of 14 people killed every day, including soldiers, guerrillas, targeted government officials and innocent civilians caught in the crossfire. Once limited to small raids on isolated outposts, the rebels now regularly mount company-size and some battalion-scale operations against fortified military facilities, usually to seize weapons, ammunition and equipment.

The strength of the New People's Army is difficult to measure precisely. Yet by all accounts it has thrived and expanded its activities considerably in the aftermath of the Aquino assassination. The Philippine Government now places the rebel force at 10,000 to 12,000 — about twice the estimate just a year ago. The Communists say they have more than 20,000 armed fighters.

"The N.P.A. is winning — it's that simple," one Western military analyst said. "They aren't about to overthrow the Government now. But if the tide isn't turned over the next three to five years, the Communists could be unstoppable."

The growth of the N.P.A. insurgency represents the most serious challenge to American foreign policy in Southeast Asia since the mid-1970's. "The Philippines could become another Vietnam," warns Stephen J. Solarz, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs: "I doubt it would be another Vietnam in the sense of committing large numbers of American troops in the Philippines, but it could be another country lost to Communism."

The headcount of armed regulars in the New People's Army seriously understates the influence of the broader leftist movement of which the guerrillas are a part, known as the National Democratic Front. An umbrella group embracing various community, labor, church and other organizations, the National Democratic Front claims to have a membership of one million and the support of 10 million Filipinos, out of a population of 54 million people. Its constituent organizations are committed to supporting the guerrilla warfare of the New People's Army and to a vaguely Marxist economic program calling for the nationalization of selected industries.

The National Democratic Front advocates an anti-American foreign policy, demanding the removal of the two large United States military facilities here, Clark Air Base and the naval base at Subic Bay, and the expulsion of most American corporations. The two Philippine bases are an essential part of United States military capabilities in Southeast Asia, and most analysts agree that their loss would be a major setback to American security interests. This concern has been heightened by the expansion of Soviet military activity in the region, centered around the former American facilities at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam.

Still, the leftist revolution gaining ground in the Philippines seems to be a home-grown phenomenon. It is a third-world nationalist movement preaching nonalignment, although critics point out that, as with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and other rebel movements elsewhere in the third world, the N.P.A.'s true orientation may not be revealed until it has succeeded in gaining power. Its revolutionary ideology is borrowed from Marx, Lenin and Mao, but its leaders say they are adamantly opposed to falling under the imperialistic sway of any superpower. Moving into the Soviet orbit, they insist, will never be a part of their program.

According to State Department officials, there is no evidence of "material" support from foreign governments. However, there is evidence, they say, of financial support from sympathetic leftist groups, mostly in Europe. The biggest sources of funds, according to these officials, are organizations in the Eastern bloc, Scandinavia and West Germany. Where those groups, in turn, get their money is unknown — leaving open the possibility of indirect Soviet financing.

The Philippine revolutionaries appear to be skittish about direct Soviet support, in part because N.P.A. leaders believe that any overt connections linking their group to Moscow would invite American intervention in the Philippines. And Chinese support of the N.P.A. is unlikely, State Department officials say, because the Chinese seem

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willing to tolerate the Marcos Government and American bases as a counterweight to Soviet activity in the region.

TODAY, THE NEW People's Army is active in nearly all of the country's 73 provinces. Western analysts estimate that the N.P.A. effectively controls 20 percent or more of the villages, or barrios, in the Philippines. The Marcos Government claims such estimates are exaggerated. But barrio residents, businessmen and hacienda managers in some areas of N.P.A. strength report that the percentage is far higher, with Communist shadow governments, called Barrio Revolutionary Councils, controlling as much as 50 percent of the barrios in many towns.

The group's members are young, 19 or 20 years old, on average. Judging from interviews with more than two dozen N.P.A. fighters in three different units in southeastern Luzon, most are the sons and daughters of impoverished tenant farmers. The majority never finished high school. Without the alternative offered by the New People's Army, they faced the same fate as their parents, working long hours to scrape a subsistence from the coconut stands they farm. They are the underclass in a feudal agrarian world of two classes — the hacienderos and the tenants.

The hacienderos, or landlords, frequently live in Manila, and their farms are run by hired supervisors. The tenants work the land, but the hacienderos take most of the crop, with the tenants making do with what is left. It is enough for a dirt-floor dwelling of a couple of rooms with no plumbing. If there is electricity, it is typically supplied by a car battery wired to a naked lightbulb or two.

N.P.A. fighters speak of the injustice of Philippine society, and they defend their movement as an attempt to improve the lives of disadvantaged tenant farmers like their relatives and neighbors. But few of them talk of the other two main elements in N.P.A. doctrine — opposing imperialism and "bureaucrat" capitalism.

All the rebels in the outlawed movement have adopted a nom de guerre. The "Ka" is short for "kasama," the Tagalog word for comrade or companion; a first name or Filipino nickname follows. Ka Nestor, a 28-year-old who became a guerrilla seven years ago, conceded that his early knowledge of the group's doctrine was limited. "In truth," he said, "when I joined I did not really understand the objectives of the movement. I had only a general idea that this was for the good of the people."

Nineteen-year-old Ka Andy, a veteran N.P.A. guerrilla who bears the scars of seven bullet wounds suffered in battle, is now a member of an N.P.A. "sparrow squad," which specializes in assassinations of local officials and military officers. "I don't pray anymore," he says, in a statement typical of many N.P.A. fighters, most of whom, like 85 percent of Filipinos, were raised as Roman Catholics. "I don't believe in God anymore. The N.P.A. is my family now and the movement is my religion."

To its members and to the local communities where it is strong, the N.P.A. has sold itself as a kind of "social police." It maintains peace and order, administers its brand of rough justice, collects taxes and carries out its version of agrarian reform. In the N.P.A. program of land reform, the traditional crop-sharing arrangement on tenant farms, which gives the landlord two thirds of the crop and the tenant one third, is reversed.

There have been signs that once the N.P.A. is powerful in an area, it tends to abandon its "Robin Hood" image and use force to extort funds from villagers and gain support through coercion. Yet for the most part, the N.P.A. is still widely perceived as a benevolent organization, performing tasks for the community that the Government should but does not.

This image has imbued most of the rebels with a sincere belief in the righteousness of their revolutionary movement, despite the violence and hardship the guerrilla life involves. The N.P.A. preaches abstinence and discipline. Drinking is banned. There are strict rules guiding courtship (including the pointed suggestion not to marry outside the movement). Premarital sex is outlawed.

Like soldiers in any army, the N.P.A. fighters have lengthy periods of empty time. They fill it playing volleyball, telling stories and jokes, strumming guitars and singing. All activities seem to include people in groups of three or four or more. Few individuals are left to themselves. Asked what she liked about being a member of the N.P.A., Ka Totoy, a 21-year-old guerrilla, replies: "The principles, the discipline and the camaraderie."

The rebel movement, for security reasons, is intentionally vague about its command structure, both at the national and regional levels. Two former campus activists at the prestigious University of the Philippines in Manila, Rodolfo Salas and Rafael Baylosis, are identified by Government authorities as the chairman and secretary general of the party. For their part, the guerrillas will not identify anyone by title, except to say someone is "senior member" or a "responsible officer" in the N.P.A.

THE SLIGHT 36-year-old man, with a pencil-thin mustache and heavy-lidded eyes, is known as Ka Oggie. He is one of the most senior members of the N.P.A. in the Bicol region, or nationally, for that matter. An anti-Government activist in Manila, he joined the rebels in the hills in early 1970. That was 15 months after 11 young revolutionaries, in a split with the ineffectual, Soviet-oriented Hukbalahap rebel group, formally created the Communist Party of the Philippines, on Dec. 26, 1968. The young radicals pledged to re-establish the party "guided by Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought." In keeping with the Maoist edict that "power grows out of the barrel of the gun and

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the party controls the gun," the New People's Army, the party's military wing, was established on March 29, 1969 — one year before Ka Oggie joined up.

Seated on the floor of a tenant farmer's dwelling one night, smoking and speaking by the light of a kerosene lamp, Ka Oggie said that the N.P.A.'s first decade had been marked by mistakes and setbacks. The group's ideological fervor did not translate into combat effectiveness. "We didn't know anything about waging a war," the rebel veteran said, "and we had to learn with many lives, unfortunately."

In the 1970's, the movement's agrarian reform was more radical than the current program, and mistakenly so, in the view of today"s rebel leaders. "It was 90 percent for the tenant and 10 percent for the landlord," Ka Oggie said. "If the landlord did not accept, there was confiscation. That extreme approach lost us the support of the middle forces — landlords and small-business men. Now, we recognize that we need their support."

Indeed, the N.P.A.'s ability to recover from its early setbacks is largely attributable to its flexibility. It has adapted Communist revolutionary theory to Philippine conditions, broadening its support.

Militarily, the party has also fashioned a Filipino variant of the Maoist model, tailored to the nation's geography. The blueprint for its brand of guerrilla warfare was presented in a 1974 tract entitled "Specific Characteristics of Our People's War," by Amado Guerrero, thought to be a pen name for José María Sison, a founder and first chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines.

"In a small, fragmented country like the Philippines," Guerrero wrote, "it would be foolhardy for the central leadership to ensconce itself in one limited area." Instead, he declared, the N.P.A. should set up a series of decentralized "guerrilla fronts," each spanning several adjacent towns and villages and including a party organ, an N.P.A. unit and a network of civilian organizations supporting the revolutionary movement. At present, the rebels claim to have more than 60 such fronts scattered across the country.

Building popular support is the foremost consideration of the revolutionary movement, Ka Oggie stressed: "We are doing things in the countryside that any decent government ought to be doing — helping poor people meet their basic needs and giving them justice."

"What we do is like pouring water into an empty glass," he continued. "We give them something, while the government gives them nothing."

Government officials dismiss such claims as self-serving romanticism. The N.P.A., President Marcos asserts, is less concerned with improving life in the Philippines than with justifying the actions of a membership that is made up largely of "plain criminals, local bandits, or bored young people seeking adventure."

The movement's foreign policy is still developing. At this juncture, it seems to be a leftist amalgam of nationalism, Marxism and opportunism. According to the Communists and the members of the National Democratic Front, their objection to the American military bases in the Philippines is primarily nationalistic. They don't want any foreign bases in the country, they say, adding that the Philippines should be a neutral, nonaligned nation.

Yet the June 1985 edition of Ang Bayan, the underground publication of the Communist Party of the Philippines, declared: "It is the duty of the Filipino people to forge links of solidarity with the other peoples of the world. Our principal enemy is U.S. imperialism, which is also the principal enemy of the peoples of the world."

Virtually every observer of the Philippine guerrilla movement is watching closely for signs of outside sponsorship, but the Philippine military says it has not yet found evidence of support from any foreign government.

For his part, Ka Oggie, the Bicol guerrilla officer, says that the rebels want the backing of governments that are "friends of our revolution," though he declined to name any candidates. "It will be difficult to win without foreign support," he admits. The overseas backing that the N.P.A. needs, he says, would be mainly weapons shipments, including artillery. So far, the rebels' arms are mainly high-powered rifles, with M-16's by far the most common. They also have carbines, and some machine guns and grenade launchers. Much of what they carry bears the legend "property of U.S. Government" or "U.S. Army," having been seized from the Philippine military in ambushes or, occasionally, purchased from corrupt officers.

To benefit from foreign backing, Ka Oggie said, the Philippine guerrillas must first increase their strength enough to control large sections of the nation's shoreline so that weapons shipments can land easily. The N.P.A. should reach that threshold in "a couple of years," he figures.

TALL, LEAN, WITH close-cropped gray hair, Col. Rodolfo Biazon stands at the forefront of the Philippine Government's effort to stem the growth of the Communist insurgency. The 50-year-old marine commander heads the counterinsurgency drive in the area around Davao, the sprawling port city of Mindanao. In Davao, the New People's Army is so active with its organizing, tax collections and selective liquidations of police and other officials that Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile has called the city a "laboratory for the N.P.A." It is Biazon's job to make sure that the Communist experiment in Davao and the surrounding countryside is not a success.

Following the declaration of martial law in 1972, the Philippine military acquired a reputation for being corrupt, abusive and top-heavy with officers personally close to President Marcos. Biazon epitomizes the other side of the military — the professional soldiers. He is a graduate of the Philippine Military Academy, which is modeled after West Point. He is intelligent, articulate and respected both by supporters of the Government and by its strident critics. The marines under his command are also highly regarded in the community. They are disciplined, well trained and well equipped troops.

Biazon commands military sweeps in the hills surrounding Davao to capture guerrilla units, but he spends most of his time talking to civilians, usually in small groups. He talks to students, local businessmen, opposition politicians, anybody who will listen. "The military side of the N.P.A. is often overstated," Biazon says.

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"The real danger is their teach-ins, their so-called education program. That is what I work to counteract, and that's where the main counterinsurgency battle has to be fought and won."

"This insurgency problem," he went on, "is not going to be solved by body counts. The important thing is to change the thinking of the people. They have to be convinced that their grievances against the Government may be temporary and that Communism is the real enemy."

Biazon views himself as a kind of evangelist. In his lectures, he sides with institutions, not personalities. "I teach for democracy and against Communism," he explains. "I don't promote the Government." At times, in fact, he sounds like an opposition politician: "If you take away the opposition groups, you have a dictatorship. They are the alternative for a peaceful change. We need them." To the opposition, his admonition is to beware of the "danger of Communist infiltration" — a warning he presents as the lesson of the Nicaraguan revolution.

During the last year, more than 20 barrios in Davao that were once heavily influenced by the Communists have been returned to Government control, thanks to the counterinsurgency campaign. But in some of these, the marines are nothing more than an occupying force, and the civilian population is neutralized. "If the marines are there, the villagers support them," noted Prospero Nograles, a Davao human-rights lawyer. "But if the N.P.A. comes in, they will cooperate with them."

Another important factor is the presence of less-disciplined Government troops in the area. The marines under Biazon account for only about one third of the regular military troops in the area. These 4,500 regulars are far outnumbered by the 7,000-strong contingent of the paramilitary civilian home defense force. Poorly paid, badly equipped and often undisciplined, these units occupy the lowest rung of the Philippine military. They are known as trigger-happy bad boys who are frequently little more than guns-for-hire, and whose side businesses include theft and extortion. So, though Biazon and his charges are impressive and respected, they are not the face of the military that most people see.

THE N.P.A.'S STRUGgle has been promoted by it followers not as a coming Communist takeover, but as a nationalist revolution. The nationalist theme has broad appeal in the Philippines, which was a Spanish colony for nearly four centuries and then, from 1898 to 1946, was controlled by the United States, except for the Japanese occupation during World War II. In their small-group indoctrination sessions, the leftists rarely mention the word "communism." In fact, many full-time members of the movement, including some in the armed units, insist they are not Communists, but merely part of the National Democratic Front.

Whether this is a distinction with a difference is dubious. In ideological terms, the Philippine Communist Party and the National Democratic Front are virtually indistinguishable, blaming "American imperialism" for most of the problems in their country and elsewhere, and advocating the necessity of armed rebellion.

Still, many middle-class Filipinos who support the leftist cause do not believe they are backing Communism and, perhaps naïvely, do not believe that their business interests and property will be taken from them if the rebels win. A 38-year-old lawyer who is a landowner in southern Luzon says: "I don't think this will be a Communist country, even after the revolutionary movement takes over. It is because democracy has been subverted in this country that I support this revolutionary movement."

Even some longtime party members explain the Communist element in the movement more in terms of pragmatism than as an unshakable faith in Communist doctrine. Ka Cesar, a rugged 35-year-old with a stocky physique, is a senior party cadre in the Bicol region. At the home of a large landowner sympathetic to the movement, he said: "We believe that radical change is needed in this country, and we need an ideology. We have seen that the Marx-Lenin-Mao approach has been effective in waging and winning revolutionary struggles elsewhere."

"But," he continued, "that doesn't mean it will have that character here. We are open to all elements of other ideologies as long as they help us win."

Yet many Filipinos wonder whether the movement's tactics as it strains to increase its base of popular support are only that — tactics, to be cast aside as its strength increases. This kind of reservation is frequently heard among other opponents of the Marcos Government, especially moderates seeking nonviolent change.

One of these is Jaime V. Ongpin, a Harvard-trained corporate executive in Manila and a persistent critic of the Marcos Government. In Ongpin's view, the growth of the New People's Army is largely a symptom of the nation's problems — an authoritarian regime, a bloated and abusive military and a prostrate economy riddled with corruption and favoritism. The communist insurgency, he believes, will wither away if the Philippines gets rid of Marcos and then sets about the tasks of reviving democratic institutions and reforming the military and the economy.

"The rise of the N.P.A. is alarming but not overpowering," Ongpin says. "There is still time. Ninety percent of the guerrillas are not committed to the Communist ideology. They are just people reacting to circumstances — poverty and military abuses. At present, with Marcos's power, they are not given a decent alternative to joining the N.P.A. But the Filipino is not a Bolshevik. He doesn't want that much. He wants to be left alone, to earn a decent living and have enough to send his kids to school."

Ongpin may not want Communism in the Philippines but, like a growing number of moderates, he doesn't want the American military bases in the Philippines either. Ongpin favors the departure of the American presence as a pragmatic nationalist: he does not think the bases serve the Philippines. And asked if he would stay in the Philippines if the nation turned Communist, he replies: "Yes I would. I am Filipino and this is my country, regardless." ■